Based on a True Story

Mary Elkins
Virginia Commonwealth University

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BASED ON A TRUE STORY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of Arkansas, 2008

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Virginia Commonwealth University
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Abstract

Based on a True Story

By Mary Elkins

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

Committee: Shay Church, Debbie Quick and Susan Iverson
Craft/Material Studies Department

Trying to remember is a form of forgetting. Memory fades, changes meaning, and disappears over time. While trying to find other ways to preserve stories about my family, it occurred to me that I could recreate what I remember in clay. I am creating collections of physical mementos of the memories that fill my head, focusing mainly on my childhood. Remembering is in itself an act of forgetting, and thus this is my memory preservation kit. I am recording memories of my family for posterity in clay before I have a chance to forget.
I. Fixation on Memory

My work revolves around memories of family, home and domesticity. I focus on these topics because of their concrete, important, and always slightly changing status in my life. There were no drastic across-the-country moves in my childhood, aside from one I don’t remember, at the age of two where I moved from Germany to Arkansas. Normal childhood stuff happened to me; parents divorcing and remarrying, gaining new step-parents and step-siblings, moving across town and changing schools. I am making ceramic symbols for what have become the most informative moments to me as I grew up. These symbols form a retrospective of memories from my childhood. The importance of memory is an element that is pervasive in both my work and my life. In this thesis I will record the memories surrounding each of the objects I am making because the stories inform the objects that have been made, and I want them to be recorded somewhere outside of these objects.

After my parents divorced, I was the only one who wanted to keep their wedding album. It is important for me to remember that while my parents were not meant to stay together, they were happy together once, and my brother and I are a result of that happy relationship. Their wedding album shows a ceremony neither of my parents cares to remember at this point in their lives, which is understandable because they have both moved on and are now married to other people. Currently in my work I am compiling many memories from childhood that surround the time before my family had so many different facets. Unlike the wedding album, I am creating a neutral physical place where all of these influences from both sides of my family can coexist in peace without anyone feeling awkward or uncomfortable.
In high school I covered my walls with page-sized color photos from Kinko’s; even then I loved remembering my experiences with friends and family. I always wanted my dad to come into my room at my mom’s house to see how awesome my room was. He would come, but was very uncomfortable there, because it was still a room in my mom’s house. The same was true for my mother coming to see my room in my dad’s house. In making these objects that become surrogates for these people in my life, I can avoid the feelings of discomfort my parents had in these situations. For example, I have made a ceramic version of my dad’s patriarchal chair, and my mom’s wooden spoon, they are physical objects based on prominent memories of them. These two objects can coexist and I use them to collect and create connections with my past.

II. Fear of Forgetting

My grandmother had Alzheimer’s, and witnessing her slow loss of all memory triggered my fear of forgetting. Her name was Mary and I am her namesake. This is part of why I have thought so much about memory loss. She even forgot my grandfather eventually, asking “Where is Charlie?” and not recognizing that he was Charlie. I think about using the objects I make as a reminder of who I am one day if I do forget. These ceramic objects can also be used as a way to think about what is currently important to me by mapping priorities of my past. There is a specific “… moment when imminent loss drives the impulse to record and remember.”¹ Making this work is my way of combating one day forgetting myself. If I do eventually forget everything, there will at least be a way for me or others to figure out part of who I was by seeing installations of these ceramic objects.

I am making still lifes of my childhood in three dimensions using symbols that indicate what was important to me while growing up. On one level this is for posterity, and I am saying, “Anything can be important in your life. Even the little things like M&Ms and marshmallows can stick in your head as part of pivotal memories.” These relatively minor things in my life have added crucial details to the important experiences surrounding them, and all of this has made me who I am. My fear of forgetting has been a means of creating and defining my identity, and this solidifies the vision I have of myself.

I know it was difficult for my grandfather to take care of my grandmother when she could no longer take care of herself. It was heartbreaking when we realized that she no longer knew who he was, and I know this was disheartening for him. I think of the work I am making now as insurance or some small protection against that happening to me one day. These objects do not make it impossible for me to forget my own husband, but they do make me feel more in control of what might happen. I think if my grandfather had looked at my grandmother’s scrapbooks in the midst of taking care of her, his spirits would have been lifted, and hers might have as well.

III. For Posterity

Recording my life as I live it has become important to me since experiencing my grandmother’s Alzheimer’s. When I was thirteen I began keeping photo albums and a journal. My parents did not keep photo albums, aside from the aforementioned wedding album. They took photos, developed them, framed some, and put the rest in a box. My grandfather was my role model for keeping photo albums, which he started when he married my grandmother. There were thirty albums when he died. Everything has to start somewhere and to Charles Flint that
was when he married Mary King. I always wondered what happened to all of the photos of the
time before my grandparents were married.

All of the photos in my grandfather’s albums were posed, which caused each of those
moments to be somewhat forced and changed the way those events are remembered. My mom
always talks about how much she hated always having to smile for these photos growing up.
These albums were a great record of their life, but getting everyone to pose and smile all the time
seemed like faking parts of life and altering memories as they happen. I started thinking that
candid photos are better because no one has to put on a fake smile, and that outtakes are
important because they show a different side of things.

One summer I had a goal to organize all of my immediate family’s photos. I was only
twelve at the time, so I needed the help of my mother’s memory to date these photos. I wanted to
do it “right” and have all of the images in order, because that was the way my grandfather’s
albums were organized. I liked the idea of having things in order, and even then I enjoyed seeing
and thinking about my family when we were one unit. My summer endeavor frustrated me
because it did not result in an album of any sort, just a bunch of dated photos in a box.

I decided to start my own album from my own point of view as a teenager. There were
redundant photos of the same friends repeated over and over in different situations, but images of
my family were also repeated. Those albums visually show who was in my life at any given
time, and the more each person was pictured, the more important they were. After keeping
albums for years, I realized that taking photos and recording your life helps shape the things you
remember. It became a “Catch 22”; I was recording things so I would not forget, but in doing this
I would forget many of the things I had not recorded, and only remember those I documented.
The mundane everyday moments tend to be forgotten, so now I try to document these as well.
After seeing my grandfather document his life through his photo albums, I noticed there were other ways to record your memories. I started keeping a journal at about the same time as my photo albums. My mother had always kept a journal, and it seemed like a good way to process life experiences. My journals always illustrated who or what I was thinking about at any particular time. I write mine knowing that one day someone will read them. Essentially, I wish I could read what my grandmother thought when she was young.

These photo albums and written journals inform my artwork. I feel like all of my thoughts could be gone in minutes, and one day they will be. I make this work so I will not forget what it feels like to be me. This way, there will be another kind of record of myself so I can remember or relearn how to be me, in case of amnesia, or, more likely, Alzheimer’s, since this is a hereditary disease. In addition to my journals and photo albums, creating a three dimensional record of my visions of the various people in my life and the various stories and objects they remind me of will help me remember even more.

IV. Memories into Physical Objects

Creating physical objects from my memories is very important to me after knowing people who no longer remember due to memory loss and family members that have died. My paternal grandfather, Herbert Hamilton Price Jr., or H, as he was called, died before I was born. I rarely heard stories about H, but my dad did have the foresight to record H telling three stories when he was in his sickbed. These three stories are the only way I know my grandfather’s voice. Never knowing H but hearing his three stories was powerful. One was about a trip out West in a car with a rumble seat. When I first heard the story I had no idea what a rumble seat was. Since then, I always associate rumble seats with my grandfather. There is a black, very simple rumble
seat in *Based on a True Story*. It is very nonspecific because it is my memory of someone else’s story that I never experienced, and I have only heard the story through a recording.

I want to remember when my parents were together and my family was in one home. All things come to an end, and now we live all over the country. The notion that no one except me wants my parent’s wedding album depresses me. Thinking that in the future there could be an entire section of my life that I no longer wish to remember is saddening. There are small things that I gloss over in my memories. I remind myself that my parents were happy together once upon a time and my brother and I are not just remnants of their life together. Even though I know neither of them sees the world this way I still think about it. These thoughts influence my work, as I bring memories of both parents into one cohesive setting. If left unchecked, my longing for self-definition and fear of not remembering could evaporate my identity.

Through my work I have created ties with my family, or ties with my memories of my family. Being born in Germany on an army base and moving to Arkansas when I was two, I had no real memories of that country, aside from photos and stories from my parents and older brother. I took German classes in High School and College because I was determined to study abroad so I could go back to create some ties with the area where I spent my first two years. This is an example of how memory has affected the way I live my life in addition to influencing my artwork. I am making these pieces based on my memories of childhood, and since I had no memories of Germany, I created the situation necessary to go back there to make some memories of the place that was so important to my first years.
V. **Childhood Memories made**

1. Matriarchy Blocks was a small, wooden, brightly-colored toy with elastic inside that connected all of the notched wooden blocks so they could be rearranged to make all sorts of shapes. This was one of those toys that stayed at my Grandmother Miss Kitty’s house, so all of the grandkids played with them when we were there. When I was about fourteen, one of my younger cousins broke this toy. The elastic snapped and broke, and one of the little blocks broke in half. My grandmother has always been an entertainer, one of those hostesses who is always in the kitchen fussing over something, making sure everyone else is seated and eating with everything they need before she will come and sit down. This meant that she was also very busy dealing with making the food, including rice and cheese which was the only thing my younger cousins would eat at the time.

Since Miss Kitty was busy, when this toy broke she threw it directly in the trashcan. Miss Kitty is the matriarch of the family. Hands down, ever since my grandfather H died of prostate cancer in 1979, she has been the head of the household. My family is passive-aggressive, and no one ever challenges my grandmother to her face.

I was in the other room when the toy was broken and subsequently thrown away, so I missed the entire interaction. After dinner someone mentioned it and I was so angry at my grandmother for just throwing away this piece of my childhood. It was really part of

![Matriarchy Blocks](image-url)
all of my cousins’ childhoods as well, but they were too young to care. I dug through the trash and got all of the wooden pieces out. There were tears on my part and angry words exchanged. I felt like this episode had become more dramatic in my memory, but I mentioned it to my dad the other day and he remembered it the same way.

This was when I realized I was not a kid anymore, and I could start standing up for things, even to my grandmother. I have always had emotional ties like this to objects. This is part of why I am so interested in craft and also ceramics and physically making objects with emotional ties.

2. Alice the Alligator was my favorite stuffed animal as a kid. I was around three when my brother gave her to me. When the alligator belonged to my older brother, it was a boy and his name was Alex. When Alex was given to me I knew I would rather have a girl alligator so I turned around and “Voila!” Alex turned into Alice, the female alligator. I slept with Alice for years; she was very soft and was always a comfort whenever I had trouble getting to sleep. I made multiple versions of Alice because of her importance; I wanted to get her just right. In the end each version has parts that are more accurate to my memory of her, which is fitting because memories often have portions that are clearer at different times.

Figure 2. Alice the Alligator, Version 2.0. 2011. Low Fire Clay, Paint. 3”x 26” x 11”
3. My dad’s Patriarchal Chair is the one chair in the living room that is his and his alone.

Every three or four years the chair gets worn out and a new one is purchased. It always sits in the same spot in my dad’s living room, in a prime spot by the phone, TV, and some of his bookcases. There is a general understanding about this chair; if my dad is not home, then you can sit in it, but if he is home you give up the chair for him, no questions asked. My stepbrother is the only one who tries to challenge this family understanding. He would sit in the chair and refuse to move when my dad came home from work, but his resolve would only last a few minutes. The notion of having a patriarchal chair where the father of a family sits is so ingrained in me that whenever I go over to someone’s house for the first time I always make sure to ask if people have specific spots where they like to sit. This is not reserved just for patriarchal seats. After realizing in high school that not every family adheres to this strict seating delineation, I noticed that my stepmom always sat in another prime spot in the living room. I had been sitting in “her” spot, and she never asked me to sit anywhere else because she did not feel as strongly about it as my dad.

The particular version in Based on a True Story was my dad’s Mid-Life Crisis Patriarchal Chair. All things in my dad’s Mid-Life Crisis phase were around the time of my parent’s divorce in 1992. At this time he lived in the Mid-Life Crisis Apartment, which was across from the new Wal-Mart in town. My brother and I shared a room in that apartment and I remember going to Wal-Mart and getting to pick out whichever sheets I wanted. I choose were Barbie sheets, since I was seven at the time, and I regretted this choice as soon as a year later. Never let someone under the age of fifteen have free reign over the décor of their room. Ham and I shared this room with the Bert
Price Museum of Military History, which consisted of a box of my dad’s army stuff. Rob
and Dan were the cats Dad had as mid-life crisis companions, named after his two best
friends. These cats liked to “make donations” to the Bert Price Museum of Military
History, and so the room sometimes smelled awful when we came over for the weekend.
The Patriarchal chair was red with small red and green plant like spots all over, and it was
the most comfortable chair ever. It is one of the few things that stayed in our lives beyond
the Mid-Life Crisis years, upstairs at my dad’s house. This chair is small because I have
seen it as I grow up, so it does not seem as large as it used to.

4. Books, Gin and Tonic, Remote Control (Multitasking), these are all tied to the patriarchal
chair as its accessories. As much as my family sometimes drives me crazy, I do love their
consistency, which becomes almost ritualistic in some cases. My father comes home from
work, says hello, and that he will go and “slip into
something more comfortable”, which
means changing from his coat and tie into a white t-
shirt and khaki shorts. Then he mixes himself a gin
and tonic, with a lime and enough bitters to turn his
drink pink, he grabs the paper, sits in his patriarchal
chair and turns on the TV, all the while making small
talk. As he watches the news he reads his paper and
sips his drink a, “toddy for the body”, as my

Grandmother says. She fixes a toddy for the body at 5 pm for anyone in her house over
the age of twenty-one who wants one. Different drinks are mixed at her house than at my

Figure 3. Multitasking. 2010. Low
Fire Clay, Paint. 18”x 13”x 11”
dad’s, since she just keeps rum, coke and whiskey in the house. My father comes by his regularly scheduled habits honestly.

On a recent trip I noticed that my dad’s evening ritual has a slight alteration now that DVRs exist. Now, even if we are eating dinner at my grandmother’s house when the news is on, we can still watch it when we get back, which just gives the whole ritual a larger time window. Even while my father is multitasking with his evening ritual, you can tell if he is paying attention to you or not. On our recent visit we did not turn on the TV for a full three hours when we got home from the airport; it was pretty flattering.

5. Chocolate Cake is Miss Kitty’s specialty. She loves chocolate and though none of her sons has her love of chocolate, most of her grandchildren do. Every occasion of note at her house has chocolate cake at its end. It is made in a bundt pan with chocolate chips inside the cake, with chocolate poured over the outside instead of icing. She always makes one for everyone’s birthday. For my eighteenth birthday I was in Michigan at Interlochen Arts Camp, and Miss Kitty figured out a way to ship one of her signature chocolate cakes through the U.S. Postal service. Amazingly, it arrived just in time and still tasted great.

6. Hearing a lone tuba player always makes me nostalgic for my childhood and specifically my brother. Ham played the tuba in junior high and high school and was very talented; in
order to become so he practiced constantly. I remember always being somewhat annoyed by all this tuba playing until he became a teenager and was out with his friends more and more and the tuba playing was less constant.

The summer before his senior year of high school he went to Interlochen Arts Camp for two months and the house went silent. At this point I realized this was just a taste of how it would be when he left for college, and I became nostalgic about it and started to enjoy his playing. The bell and the valves were always my favorite part of his instrument.

When he attended Interlochen Arts Camp, my brother was playing tuba and the upright bass. His instructors told him that he should either devote his time and energy to one instrument or the other, because he could either be average at both or excel at one of them. He chose the upright bass, and is now a professional Jazz musician in LA. This tuba is flattened because I always imagined that it was sad to be left behind and passed over for a string instrument.

VI. Storytelling Props

I am creating physical objects from the memories in my head, and clay is a particularly good medium to make these ephemeral moments concrete. After making these objects, they are fired and become permanent, and are records of the memories in my head, created with my hands in clay. This remembering is a version of forgetting, because the memory of something is always
altered from the original, but it is better than nothing or simply entries in my journal. It is the ultimate imaginary Barbie game, which was my way of storytelling at a young age. The stories in my head inform the objects, and thus the objects can assist in telling these stories.

When I make this work I know that my memories take on a tangible form. I have written about each object and why it is included. I want to have a record of these stories and relationships and the objects that illustrate those stories and relationships in my life. I am trying to record my life as I live it. These physical objects from my memories are storytelling props. They not only seem to hold the stories within them but also are a tribute to and a remnant of my family. The interpretations of everyday objects I am making in the studio help me record my story.

Another name for these Storytelling Props is Biographical Object. “In this sense, identities are influenced by how people tell their stories and how they interpret their experience through particular objects or artifacts.” These are given the name ‘biographical objects’ by Hoskins, and are metaphors imbued with self-definition, markers of history, experience and relationships. Biographical objects focus on our relationships to time, delimit the concrete space that defines an individual, and demonstrate the user’s everyday experience. “Articulating the personal meaning of objects in the biographical sense shapes an understanding of the deep connections between artifact and subject rather than the broad collective meaning and memories of childhood.” In my life I have created connections with these objects because they remind me of connections I have with other people.

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Since these various objects remind me of certain people, as I make the objects I feel connected to the people. I am creating a space where my ideas and memories of my entire family can exist in one place at one time with ease. All of these memories exist in my head at the same time, all jumbled up, and so I am showing them in the same physical space in a pile together. By combining all of the objects that remind me of important people from my childhood, my memories are acting as a bridge between these people so that they can, in some small way, all exist in one space together. I am creating a neutral space where all of my family members, interpreted into objects, can co-exist comfortably.

I want the viewer to think about organizing and maintaining these memories and to think about the overwhelming amount memories they have themselves. When they see my work, I want the viewer to think about exactly why memories are important. I also hope they think about what is most important to them in their own lives and memories. Trying to remember is a form of forgetting, so these are my attempt at recording these things now, while they are still around in my head. I started out in undergraduate school making houses, and now I am going back inside. After going in previously and making small furniture to record the present, I am now returning to the past. Texture and surface details can reward those viewers who pay close attention.

VII. Historical Progress in Grad School

After coming to graduate school, I started thinking about this quilt my mother made for me. When I was four she had me draw on white cotton with fabric markers to make this quilt, and she wrote the captions that I dictated to her. Later she stitched them into a quilt and finally finished it in time for my high school graduation. I converted the drawings into sculptures. I was missing my family and even though they live all over the country, I needed to create a way to
have my parents and my brother with me. That was the most exciting piece I made that first semester, and it led me to thinking about memory in other ways. I want to continue making sculptures of other characters in my life eventually.

*Figure 6. My Family. Low Fire Clay, Paint. 4’x 8’x3’*

*My Family* was the first time I really pulled from memory to make a piece. Prior to that in my work I had been recording what was presently happening, as with the small furniture in *Kitchen* and *Living Room* that I made prior to graduate school. They were made thinking about some future yet to come, to aid in looking back at that time period, moving in with my husband before getting married. With *My Family* I made them based on this drawing, thinking about how I saw my family then and how it was a snapshot of us as one unit. A couple years later my parents divorced and my family was no longer one unit. Now we all live in different parts of the country.

I avoided making quilts for a few months while making other pieces. After making *My Family*, I made tiny, brightly colored simple ceramic houses. They were organized into neighborhoods made of cardboard and set up on a futon mattress with stitching on it. I was thinking about it as a child’s toy, but it ended up being my very adult way of having control over this piece of my life. I was thinking about childhood and I stepped away from memory, trying to think about intuition, but it ended up just being hyper planning.
Next I was thinking about stitching memories together and made my postcard project. I was skirting around making quilts by doing everything except actually making a quilt. My mother and grandmother made quilts and they were very talented at it. I had no experience with it and had only seen these women in my family making quilts as a child. I was worried about the legacy I felt, at least in some way, I needed to live up to. I made a “Place” postcard piece, an “Advertisement” postcard piece, and started on the “Artist” postcard project but never finished it entirely. I realized that I should use my own imagery instead of these mass produced postcards, and just because I could remember where I was when procuring each one did not mean the viewer could see any of that.

Another more successful piece was Movie Ticket Chair, in which I covered a chair with ticket stubs from all the movies I have seen since I started saving movie tickets in 1996. It was a record of my movie viewing history, and viewers like to see which movies they recognize or remember seeing themselves. This was more successful than the postcard project in showing a collection of memories because they were more relatable.

Figure 7. Movie Ticket Chair. 2009
Tickets collected from 1996 onward, String Chair. 38”x 20” x 18”
I finally ended up making quilts about memories of my grandmother’s kitchen. They were all about recounting and remembering what she forgot. Later I made her kitchen in three dimensions; *Alzheimer’s Prep Kitchen* was my way of remembering my grandmother’s kitchen and our time spent there together. Now, even if I forget everything like she did, there will be a physical record of my memory. Making this piece made me realize how much I think about memory and that I am scared of losing my own memories.

I moved on from making the fiber kitchen to thinking about bowls, eating, and telling stories. I wanted to interview my family members about themselves and collect their stories. I feel like the art of this piece lies in my interpretation of each person and their attributes. Over the summer I made many bowls, and finally some plates, to take a break and give myself space to think in my studio practice.

My initial thesis proposal was all about sharing stories during meals and making place settings to illustrate this. Each person would have a plate, each with a different story on it, which makes eating dinner a way to keep your stories relevant and a part of your regular life. I realized that graduate school is not the place for me to hone my throwing skills, thus this will be something I do after graduation.
What if Cookies Could Change the World? was a transitional piece between making functional plates and making objects that remind me of people. I was still thinking about memories and stories. I started making ceramic “cookies” and a platter to go along with them. The action of giving a cookie and receiving one has an element of care involved that is never really recognized or considered of in depth.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 9. What If Cookies Could Change the World? 2010 Low Fire Clay, Glaze, Coffee Table, Fiber. 18”x 36”x 12”

I wanted to offer cookies to the viewer, thinking about what real cookies do for me, but this was not specific enough. The cookies that I made were abstract; disks of clay that I set on old cookie cooling brown paper bags as I made them. What if Cookies Could Change the World? is about all the batches I have made in the past and how cookies have always been a way to feel comfortable and make things better. I earned money for a band trip to Branson in seventh grade making them. Making them with my grandma was always the thing that the “Two Mary’s” did together. Each cookie is this metaphor for feeling better.

Next, I switched to making objects that remind me of important people, and the other transitional pieces were the Cookie Utensils. The mixing bowl, spoon, beaters, measuring cups and spoons were about more memories of my grandmother, Mary Flint. I started thinking about what object would embody the people closest to me, and began making those objects, including the round table for my grandfather. I decided to turn each person I was close to, or each person who had changed or influenced who I have become into an inanimate object. I was trying to tell
stories about these people with the objects that symbolize them, or the objects that remind me of important stories about them.

![Figure 10. Cookie Utensils. 2010. Low Fire Clay, Glaze. 8” x13” x 12”](image)

This eventually morphed into making objects that spark memories of my life, mostly my childhood. I decided to make my own favorite memories of each person, or the physical reminders of those memories. All of my work is now ceramic, with no hint of fiber at this point. It is all about being a kid or my childhood specifically, with Alice the Alligator and Matriarchy Blocks. There is a certain amount of irony inherent in documenting things so you do not forget them, because at a certain point the documentation becomes a sort of external hard drive for your memories, and thus you remember less on your own than you would have without the remembering obsession in the first place.

**VIII. Process**

I use a low fire clay body that vitrifies at Cone 04, or 1945 degrees Fahrenheit. I have been using the process of making pieces with coils of clay, smoothing them out and creating the basic form. Later I go back in and add texture details, as with the laundry basket and the weaving details, or the remote controls and their buttons. The resulting objects look obviously handmade. After firing to Cone 04, I paint each piece with gouache and then cover them with paste wax, which I then buff off so some of the paint comes away and it accents the handmade aspects of
each piece. The tiled rug was braided by hand using coiled clay, row by row and then attached together to create each tile.

I am working in clay because the immediacy of the clay is important to me. If I remember something, some small detail about something while working on an object, it can be added. The form change from wet to fired clay is important to me because it symbolizes the change from experiencing something to the remembering of that event. The experience of the making and remembering are complete when you can hold that memory in your hand once it is finished. I am working with the scale of objects because their importance is relative to their size. With some pieces, they are a memory from my childhood but I have also seen them regularly since then, thus they seem a bit smaller. With my dad’s patriarchal chair I remember it vividly from when I was little, but it is still in the house so I have grown up as it remained the same size. There are some other items, like my grandmother’s Mixmaster, that have grown larger in my memories and remain so because I have not seen them since becoming an adult. I would like the viewer to get a sense of homey-ness from my work and feel comfortable, and want to stick around and think about what all these things symbolize or indicate.

IX. Where My Work Fits in the Art World

Robert Therrien’s work is about memory, and though his work is inspired by his own memories, he does not like to dwell on the autobiographical nature of them. His view is that every artist uses images from their past.\(^4\) His work seems to speak more of general memory, “his works are always more generalized than particular, evoking a sense of memory rather than

specific recollections.” My work is different in that I am making very precise recollections. It is my hope that the viewer can see my work and think of bits of their own memories. The objects I make are specific to memories that are very important to me, as opposed to Therrien, who thinks of specific object or symbols and then makes them to be a more general experience. Therrien’s piece, *Under the Table* “conveys the idea of walking under a kitchen table, rather than a specific one.”

![Figure 11. Under the Table. Robert Therrien. 1994. Wood, metal, and enamel. 117 x 312 x 216 in. overall](image)

In order to make sure his work has a connection to his viewers, he makes sure “objects have a ‘universal’ shape, one that ‘belongs to everybody. Everyone can use and recognize it.’” So even when the found objects resonated with personal childhood memories, they also have to

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5 Zevlansky, 48
6 Zevlansky, 53.
Therrien seems to run his memories of childhood through a filter that will then make his work more general. This is in contrast to my work, which has pieces, such as the grey Gameboy that most people who grew up in the 1980s will recognize, so my work is tied to a specific time period by the gadgets involved. Some of these were part of everyday life when I was little, and are now unrecognizable to some people today, such as the chunky remote that is part of Multitasking. This remote belonged to one of those televisions encased in a wooden stand.

My current work fits into the tradition of Still Lifes, which were thought to be women’s work because in the 1600s when they first came about they typically showed the domestic space. A still life consists of inanimate objects which are conspicuously missing the people who placed them in their configuration. Most still lifes are paintings, but in my case they are ceramic and in three dimensions. Norman Bryson says in his book Looking at the Overlooked, that the still life unfolds at the connection of several cultural zones. One is, “the life of the table… of the artifacts which surround the subject in her or his domestic space, of the everyday world of routine and repetition, at a level of existence where events are not at all the large-scale, momentous events of History, but the small-scale, trivial, forgettable acts of bodily survival and self-maintenance.”

My work is all about the small scale and the trivial, yet memorable, pivot points of my childhood.

Claes Oldenburg is one of the main pop artists who first became famous in the 1960s. Oldenburg was originally a painter, but he moved on to three dimensional objects because he felt

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he had more freedom with them. His first move was to plaster objects, and then later he moved on to the soft sculptures with fabric, because he felt he could manipulate and push those more than the plaster. His work maintains a wonky and charming quality. People are genuinely attracted to his form of unpretentious art, based on everyday objects they can relate to.

Oldenburg’s *Floor Cake* has particular resonance with me because of my affinity to chocolate cake⁹. In the second half of his career as an artist, Oldenburg has been making large scale public art installations that are enlarged versions of everyday objects.

In a discussion with Bruce Glaser, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol that aired on the radio in June of 1964, Oldenburg said, about his intent;

“…You might ask what is the thing that has made me make cakes and pastries and all those other things. Then I would say that one reason has been to give a concrete statement to my fantasy. In other words, instead of painting it, to make it touchable, to translate the eye into the fingers. That has been the main motive in all my work.”¹⁰

This refers back to the reasons Oldenburg chose to use three dimensional objects and fiber specifically, instead of two dimensional painting. Everyone has experiences with cloth, because we all wear clothes. When we see something made of cloth, we don’t have to necessarily touch it to imagine what it would feel like, which would not be the case with some material we are unfamiliar with. *Floor Cake* is an example of this, which is made of canvas filled with foam rubber and cardboard ice cream boxes, painted with synthetic polymer paint and latex and is 4 feet 10 3/8 inches x 9 feet 6 ¼ inches x 4 feet 10 3/8 inches (1.48 x 2.9 x 1.48 m). Oldenburg was making everyday objects in odd dimensions to create physical manifestations of his fantasies. This is not so different from what I am doing with my own work, except instead of physical

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⁹ See Childhood Memories I Have Made, Number 5.
objects from my fantasies they come from fond memories, which could be seen as a form of fantasy because they have been altered over the years in my mind.

Figure 12. *Floor Cake*, Claes Oldenburg, 1962, 1.48 x 2.9 x 1.48 m

Michaelene Walsh is a ceramic artist who is visually creating poetic moments with her work. To this end, she pairs things together and makes these objects from childhood, such as *Bittersweet*, which is an installation that includes large popsicles and candies. We see these objects one way when we are small, but when we grow up they appear to us in this altered way.

Figure 13. *Bittersweet*, Michaelene Walsh, 2004. Glazed Earthenware, Variable Dimensions
The way Michaelene Walsh deals with childhood is somewhat related to my own piece, *My Family*, as interpreted from a drawing in 1990. Much of my work revolves around creating this imaginary physical space, a space that exists in my own head but nowhere else up until now.

Louise Bourgeois also made work that was inspired by her childhood, but the similarities in our work end there. Visually our work is very different. Her childhood was a traumatic one and her artwork was made to work through those events. “As she puts it, the past is something she does not remember so much as construct through her artistic encounters in the present. ‘My works are a reconstruction of past events. The past has become tangible in them; but at the same time they are created in order to forget the past, to defeat it, to relive it and to make it possible for the past to be forgotten.’” Bourgeois was making work to forget painful parts of her childhood, and I am making work from the sections of my childhood that I wish to remember.

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11 Jerry Gorovoy and Danielle Tilkin, "There’s No Place Like Home". *Louise Bourgeois Memory and Architecture*, (Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia and Aldeasa, 1999) 16.
Works Cited


Appendix of Memories Made

1. Mixmaster is the type of mixer my grandmother had. I grew up using it and when my grandmother died it was given to me. The Mixer is personified and looks like its head is cocked to the side, like it is asking a question. When I was little, Grandma and I would bake cookies and I would just hang out and watch her bake and she would give me some easy tasks like cracking the eggs or dumping the flour in the bowl. Later on, as a teenager we had switched places, and Grandma was the one sort of hanging out and I would give her small tasks, because at this point she couldn’t remember enough to be the one in charge.

2. Cookie Utensils are the physical items that would have gone into the Alzheimer’s Prep Kitchen I made for candidacy. I am making cookies and cookie accessories to think more in depth about my grandma. I also learned to bake with my mother and they remind me of her as well.

3. Baking Triumvirate is made up of Baking Soda, Salt and Vanilla. They are the key ingredients to my grandma’s famous chocolate chip cookies. The containers are extra-large because although there are only small amounts of them in the cookie recipe, they make all the difference. I am always antsy to not forget these particular ingredients because it feels like an amateur mistake and I know this recipe by heart.

Figure 14. Baking Triumvirate and Round Table. 2010 Low Fire Clay, Paint, Paste Wax. 24”x 15”x 15”
4. Round Tables were my Grandfather, Charles Flint’s favorite. Whenever we went to a restaurant, he would insist that we wait the extra thirty minutes for a round table. He believed we could all see one another at a round table and not have to talk across the table. My desire to make the round table excited comes from the time that we were going to see a movie or go ice skating, some activity we were all going to do as a big group. Everyone was ready to go, but Granddad sensed that we were not as excited about the trip as he wanted us to be. He declared that we might as well just not go. This rallied our excitement and eventually he was satisfied with our level of excitement so he decided we could go.

5. Rumble Seats always remind me of my grandfather H. He was in the Army and then became an Economics Professor. One of the stories my father recorded him telling was about H and a friend buying a car with a rumble seat and going on a cross country road trip in it. It included a stop in Colorado, where they held a revival and my grandfather posed as a preacher, and they saved three souls and earned some money to get to California. This story made me think of my grandfather, who I had never met, as a real person and not just the stoic figure I had heard stories about up until that point.

6. Butterhorn Rolls come from my great grandmother’s recipe. I started making them in junior high, which was a formidable task because they are yeast rolls that have to rise twice. I mastered making them in high school. These have been made by all of the women.

Figure 15. Butterhorn Rolls. 2011. Low Fire Clay, Paint, Paste Wax. Each  1”x 3” x 1 ½”
in my family, my grandmother Mary, then my mom, and I felt I should continue the tradition. I really liked them and wanted to have the skills to make them myself. Making these rolls myself felt like a badge of independence. Before I could make Butterhorn Rolls I would make the Pillsbury Crescent Rolls out of a can when I was in charge of my own meals while my mom was in school.

7. Empty bookcases filled the library of 2616 Rosewood Circle, the house I grew up in, from age two to twelve. My parents installed bookcases to line the entire formal living room after they moved in. My dad has countless books, and the library was full of books while they were still together. When he moved out of the house after the divorce, many of the bookshelves were empty or were low on books, which was a sad reminder of how things had changed.

8. Playschool Recorder was one of my favorite toys as a kid, especially around five years old. The tape that came with it has the voices of my family members on a trip to the beach, my dad coming home from work, talking to my mom, and asking me to stop recording them. Hearing my father and Uncles singing and talking in the background when I was young was like a time machine for me. I also recorded myself singing Amy Grant songs, which were off key and terrible, but at the time I heard only beautiful music.
9. M&M’s and marshmallows were my favorite snack as a child. I used to eat them in these small wooden bowls that were also used for other snacks, like apple slices. My friend Marie Porter especially liked coming to my house because our snacks were not always especially healthy. Marie’s mom would have never given us candy. I remembered the M&M /Marshmallow combination the other day when we had both left over at home. It was like a flash of memory coming back when I tried them together and it just tasted so right. After remembering this I wrote to Marie and mentioned them to her, and her response was that M&M’s and Marshmallows always remind her of me. It was nice hearing that this other person, who I had play dates with when we were two still remembered our snack together.

![M&Ms and Marshmallows](image)

**Figure 17. M&Ms and Marshmallows. 2011. Low Fire Clay, Paint, Paste Wax. 5”x 8”x 4”**

10. My grandma, Miss Kitty has to take eye drops every morning and night, and she always looks into the round mirror in the entryway to her house. I remember thinking that the mirror was so high up and I was truly impressed that she could see her face in it. Also the mirror looks a bit like the Mirror on the wall from Snow White, and perhaps this sparked my curiosity as a child.

11. Mary, my other grandmother always wore a thimble while sewing. My mother always used one while quilting. When I was younger I always thought using a thimble looked so
exciting, partially because I was so impressed with what each woman was making with her hands and the thimble seemed to help make that happen.

12. Cheerios were my favorite as a little girl. I enjoyed pretending to cook with them. Once on a road trip, my big brother decided to see how many Cheerios I could eat. He kept feeding them to me and I kept eating them until I eventually became sick all over him.

13. Gin and Tonic is my father’s drink of choice.

The more limes in his glass, the more drinks he has had. They are always made in a particular kind of glass at his house. I always associate them with relaxation, because it meant my dad was home.

14. One day shortly before or after my stepmom married my Dad, she and I took this wreath from Hobby Lobby, some fake flowers, and a hot glue gun and made this wreath for my room at my Dad’s house. It was symmetrical, with these purple flowers on it. My stepmom was making a concerted effort to bond with me, so this wreath means a lot.

15. Tetris this is the only video game I have ever really enjoyed, and Game Boy was the
best way to play it. I used to borrow it from my brother all the time. I have a theory that I was initially drawn to ceramics in part because loading kilns is a bit like a game of Tetris.

16. I was bound and determined to give my brother fuzzy dice for his 16th birthday, because it seemed entirely necessary for them to be in his car as he began driving. It took me forever to find a pair. It was particularly exciting when my brother started driving because that meant instead of Dad picking us up from Mom’s house for our Wednesday nights with him or for every other weekend, Ham could drive us. This was much more pleasant for everyone. I was also excited to hang out with my big brother in his car, if only for a few minutes.

17. My grandma buys all of her food items on sale and dates everything with a permanent marker on the box or on the lid. She was an army wife, had three sons and was one of five children growing up. She could go on living in the same way, eating the same things for months if she somehow could not get to the store and still had electricity.

18. Miss Kitty used to always make sand tart Christmas cookies in all of these different shapes, decorated in different colors. She stopped making them a few years ago, I think because she had no more young grand kids to make them with, or because it was one less thing for her to do. I always forget or gloss over how old she is getting.

19. My grandfather built us a treehouse in the back yard when I was little. It was a two story treehouse, with a swing off to one side and a bucket on a pulley system so you could
transport things easily up to either level. We had a sand box below the first level.

Basically it was the best treehouse ever, and to this day it is still in the back yard of our old house. This is one piece that did not make it into the final presentation of my thesis.

20. I used to enjoy sitting in our laundry basket. It was just the right size for me when I was three and my brother would push me around the house in it sometimes. Laundry baskets just remind me of being young and small.

21. Miss Kitty was born and raised in Petersburg, Virginia. She has lived in Arkansas for the past forty years after fifteen years as an army wife. Every year she makes a Virginia ham at Christmas. Once my Dad came back from a conference in Virginia Beach in November so he flew with the ham as his carryon. Acquiring this ham is always an event.

22. My mother has always had a sewing machine around. She is an amazing seamstress and is an artist who uses sewing occasionally in her work as well. When I was a teenager I gained new respect for my mother’s sewing skills after trying to sew a few things myself.

Figure 20. Sewing Machine, Installation View, in Based on a True Story. 2011. Low Fire Clay, Paint. 12”x 6” x 17”
23. Taylor’s Pork Roll is a meat from New Jersey that my family loves because they lived there for a few years while my grandfather was getting his Masters in Economics from Rutgers. Anytime someone in the family finds Taylor’s Pork Roll somewhere, they buy up as much as possible and it is a big event. My father and his brothers seem to have an ongoing competition to see who can present my grandmother with the most Taylor’s Pork Rolls.

24. Miss Kitty has oblong braided rugs in her kitchen covering her brick floors. Seasonally the rugs in her house change, from fall to spring.

Figure 21. Based on a True Story, Close up of Rug, Mixmaster, Taylor’s Pork Roll and Alice 2.0, 2011. Low Fire Clay, Paint, Paste Wax. Installation 2 1/2’x 9’x 6’
Mary Elkins was born July 21, 1985 on an Army Base in Augsburg, Germany. She moved to Jonesboro, Arkansas two years later and grew up there, graduating from Jonesboro High School in 2003. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Studio Art- Ceramics with a double major in German from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

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Education
2011  MFA Craft/Material Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, emphasis in Ceramics
2008  BFA Studio Art, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas
Emphasis in ceramics, with a double Major in German
Four years Honors Student, Cum Laude
2005  Karl Franzens Universitaet, Study Abroad for one year in Graz, Austria

Professional Experience
2010  Graduate Teaching Assistantship, CRAF 240, “Introduction to Ceramics”, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
2008  Interlochen Arts Camp, Art Assistant in Ceramics to Jen Poueymirou, Interlochen, Michigan
Work Study, competitive position in Ceramics for the Art Department, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas
2007  Ceramics Instructor “Clay Creatures”, Ages 6-12, competitively picked to teach and plan a class for children at St. Tammany Art Association, Covington, Louisiana
2007  Work Study, competitive position in Ceramics for the Art Department, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas
2005-04  Arts and Crafts Counselor, Camp Mitchell, Morrilton, Arkansas
Created, organized and carried out an arts and crafts curriculum for two summers
2003-02  Weaving Teacher, Charlott Jones School of Art, taught adults and children weaving, as a senior in high school, Jonesboro, Arkansas
Awards and Grants

2011  Thesis Assistantship, Virginia Commonwealth University Graduate School
      Richmond, Virginia
2008  Blanche Hanks Elliot Art History Scholarship, University of Arkansas,
      Fayetteville, Arkansas
      Who’s Who of American College Students
2007-03 Honors College Academy Scholarship, University of Arkansas,
        Fayetteville, Arkansas
2005  Sturgis Study Abroad Grant, Highest amount awarded, to study abroad in Graz,
        Austria for one year

Exhibitions

2011  Based on a True Story, MFA Thesis Show, Anderson Gallery, Virginia
      Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
      New Waves, juried by Craig Drennen, Contemporary Art Center of
      Virginia, Virginia Beach, Virginia
      Materials: Hard and Soft, juried by Tom Lauerman, Medows Gallery,
      Denton, Texas
2010  Virginia Artists 2010 Juried Exhibition, juried by Nancy Sausser, Charles H.
      Taylor Arts Center, Hampton, Virginia
      Crafting Place: Interpretations of Environment from the Kitchen to the Forest,
      juried by Kenneth R. Trapp, Sugar Gallery, Fayetteville, Arkansas
      New Waves, juried by Steven Matijcio, Contemporary Arts Center of Virginia,
      Virginia Beach, Virginia
      show, curated by Robin Atkinson, Antenna Gallery, New Orleans,
      Louisiana
      Alter Ego, group show, collaboration with Amanda Breide and Jacob Sorenson,
      FAB Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
      44th Annual Summer Show, juried by Greely Myatt, St. Tammany Art
      Association, Covington, Louisiana
      Art Amiss X, juried by panel, Dickson Street Theater, Fayetteville, Arkansas
2008  51st Annual Delta Exhibition, juried by Eleana Del Rio, Arkansas Arts Center,
      Little Rock, Arkansas
      House; Home, Honors Thesis Solo Show, Anne Kittrell Gallery, Student
      Union, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas
      Ceramic Objects/ Conceptual Material, juried by John Perreault, New York Art
      Critic, 200 international pieces submitted, 30 accepted, only
      undergraduate student in show, DDP Gallery, Fayetteville, Arkansas
2007  Paint for a Cure, Group Exhibition, won 3rd place Anne Kittrell Gallery, Student
      Union, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas
      Summer Student Show, Group Exhibition, Fine Arts Gallery, University of
      Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas
“Slippage,” Group Exhibition Anne Kittrell Gallery, Student Union, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas

“American Childhood Quilt,” Collaborative Installation with Slip casting Class
Student Union, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas

2006 Study Abroad Photo Competition, juried show, Honorable Mention, University of Arkansas Multicultural Center, Fayetteville, Arkansas

**Publications**

2010 Ceramics Monthly, September 2010 issue, image of work included in VCU’s profile

2008 Crafting Content Symposium Catalogue, with image of the work accepted in *Ceramic Objects/Conceptual Material* show, juried by John Perreault

**Conferences/Symposia**

2010 National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) Member, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2008 Crafting Content: Ceramics Symposium, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas

2007-08 National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) Member, Louisville, Kentucky and Pittsburg, Pennsylvania

2006 Ceramics Symposium, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas

**Student Involvement**

2008-06 President of Association of Ceramic Enthusiasts (ACE), Co-Organized four ACE ceramic sales, planned NCECA travel, installed shows in conjunction with the Ceramics Symposium University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas

2008 Assistant to David East during the three day 2008 *Crafting Content Ceramics Symposium* at University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas

Wrote the Budget and helped with funding for: Association of Ceramic Enthusiasts, the Fine Arts League, and the Contemporary Sculpture Society, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas

Member of Contemporary Sculpture Society and Fine Arts League

2007 Assistant to Robin Hopper, International Ceramic Artist during three day workshop, Flat Rock Clay Studio, Fayetteville, Arkansas

Tour of the Ceramics Studio given to 30 Central United Methodist Church Summer Day Care Children, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas

2006 Assistant to Visiting Artists, Michaelene Walsh, Sanam Emami, and Katy Rush at the Ceramics Symposium, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas

2004-05 Peer Mister at St. Martin’s Episcopal University Center, facilitated and planned meals and program, Fayetteville, Arkansas